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U.S. Leaks And the Afghan Resistance

There is a hard-headed case to be made against U.S. efforts to help Afghanistan's freedom fighters. It is that the level of aid we can realistically hope to deliver discreetly cannot be decisive.

So all we are doing is building false hope and prolonging the agony to no effect other than to make Soviet "pacification" more costly—and more brutal.

An opposite view assumes that the Soviets are hurting from the cost of the war and at the hands of world opinion, particularly Moslem. If the cost to the Soviets can be made sufficiently severe, this argument goes, there could be hope for some sort of diplomatic solution.

Now there's a purpose with a point, providing that adequate amounts of the right kinds of arms can be delivered through the principal conduit, Pakistan, without putting the Pakistanis at grave risk of Soviet retaliation.

That's the tricky part. The Soviets know perfectly well what's going on. But that doesn't mean they will accept indefinitely Pakistan's ritual denials. This is all the more so if the United States not only increases its aid but boasts about it.

We are talking, then, about the need for a certain subtlety. And yet, there it was in *The Wall Street Journal* the other day: "House Panel Votes to Give Afghan Rebels \$50 Million in Covert Help, Sources Say."

The story under the headline said that the House Appropriations Committee had "secretly attached \$50 million for covert aid to Afghan rebels," according to "intelligence sources."

Confirming the *Journal's* account, *The Washington Post* credited "congressional sources." By nightfall, the story was all over television's evening news.

Not the least of the questions this raises is whether the United States, having reached a certain maturity in the early postwar years about the way to handle this sort of thing, has not been reduced to some sort of second childhood by the torrid revelations of congressional investigations of the CIA in 1975.

Covert means, well, covert—if you're going to do it at all. Yet we read in the Democratic Party platform a promise to support the efforts of the Afghanistan freedom fighters with "material assistance." Those trigger words come straight from a heavily cosponsored resolution now before Congress. It was first introduced by Sen. Paul Tsongas (D-Mass.) in 1982, when its passage might have escaped wide notice.

But the senator apparently is now having second thoughts about how hard to press it; the U.S. effort in Afghanistan is considerably bigger today, and the sensitivities of the Pakistanis have become a good deal more acute. But having signed on, a lot of cosponsors are uncomfortable with the idea of signing off on their devotion to Freedom Fighters.

You could argue that none of this matters when you consider how much of the American "covert" program has found its way into the news. Perhaps the most striking example is a *Time* magazine account a couple of months ago of precisely what weapons the CIA is providing the rebel Mujahedin, the exact supply routes—even the way land mines were disguised as "telephone equipment for a religious organization."

It is hard to believe such meticulous minutiae could have been assembled without help from the agency in charge—the CIA. And it is equally hard to believe that these suspected CIA leaks are unrelated to a general tendency in the Reagan administration to flaunt its anti-communist fervor—to a recognizable need on the part of its more pronounced ideologues for the psychic income, so to speak, that comes from the whole world's knowing.

Whatever the motive, the effect is the same. The State Department insists the administration fully supports delicate United Nations efforts in concert with Pakistan to negotiate a Soviet withdrawal and a nonaligned government in Kabul.

Assume the administration's sincerity. That still leaves the Mujahedin, Pakistan and U.S. policy at the mercy of a leaky U.S. intelligence community, of "congressional sources" with no great care for classified information, and of politicians who cannot afford not to pledge their allegiance to Afghan freedom fighters—once the issue is out in the open.

A case can be made for sophisticated, genuinely clandestine, plausibly deniable U.S. assistance to the Afghan rebels by way of advancing the negotiating process. But there is no case for covert activities so loosely conducted that Pakistani complicity becomes a crippling liability.

U.S. policy begins to crumble when Pakistan's good faith in negotiation is compromised. It collapses if Pakistan, in the interest of self-preservation, feels compelled to clamp down on the supply pipeline to the Mujahedin.

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